

Suicide - 1932

## The Causes of Suicide

ALMOST 20,000 PERSONS KILL themselves in the United States each year, and the number is increasing.

The community, says *The Statistical Bulletin* of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (New York) is becoming greatly concerned at this distressing wastage of valuable human life.

The public is likewise seeking an explanation of the rising death-rate due to this cause. To many, the current increase in the amount of suicide is simply the effect of the economic depression. Statisticians, we are told, are convinced that this explanation, while plausible, is not complete. *The Bulletin* goes on: 11-12-32 New York

"Many other factors which are generally overlooked are tied up with the state of mind which results in self-destruction. Suicide is a complex social phenomenon which reflects not only the environment in which a person finds himself, but, to an equal extent, the character of the personality and the nature of the individual. Nat. 114, New York

"The suicide rate increases very rapidly with age; it is much higher for males than for females; it varies greatly among the different races. It is these angles of the problem which have not received sufficient attention in current discussion.

"The suicide rate began to rise as early as 1925, and has mounted steadily every year. Disconcertingly high as the rate is at present, the figures for the industrial policyholders of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company are still below what they were prior to the World War. The war years, it is interesting to observe, showed a declining rate. A minimum was reached in 1920. There is little doubt but that the low figures reflected the intense interest which the great mass of the people had in living. Life was, on the whole, a great adventure in those days. It is thus clear that the recent upward trend, altho undoubtedly accelerated by hard times, can not be the result of economic causes alone.

"We admit that there are to-day too many clear-cut cases of suicide resulting from pressing economic stringency to belittle that element. Proof is that the percentage increase among men has been higher than among women. Men have heavier financial responsibilities than women, and the pressure of hard times affects them the more. But other things must be considered. Suicides undoubtedly represent a group of the community who are more easily upset mentally and emotionally than the average. They are frequently persons with immature attitudes and childish methods of reacting toward life who are thrown off their balance upon slight provocation. They are overwhelmed by conditions which other people manage to surmount. Sometimes economic pressure is the determining cause; sometimes it is some problem of personal conflict or an inharmonious relationship with family or friends that they can not solve. In other words, attention must be paid to the type of personality which we find associated with suicide."

SINCE this is true, the writer thinks that those who are concerned with reducing suicide have as their objective such training of individuals as will result in a more stable and integrated personality. The loss of valuable lives could be averted, in many instances, he believes, were help given at the proper time to those who become crushed by difficulties of one kind or another. He writes further:

"In Vienna, in Berlin, in London, and in New York, organizations are working effectively to relieve and succor those who are in distress. Many of these organizations, such as the Salvation Army and antisuicide bureaus, report that a considerable degree of success has crowned their efforts.

"More important, however, than salvaging those who have already broken down is the development of a wholesome mental attitude on the part of the whole people. This is a community responsibility which the schools, the associations interested in parental education, the theater, the press, the churches—in short, all of the social forces which aim to mold character—must assume.

"Those whose minds are at peace, who have a feeling of security, who know the value of life and regard existence realistically, are very unlikely to take their lives. It is more and more the obligation of the community to develop plans to control those forces which disintegrate personality and to build up those constructive attitudes which make for wholesome, happy, and contented citizens."



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## SUMMER SCHOOL DIRECTOR FIRES

### BULLET IN HEART

MEMPHIS, Tenn.— (CNS.) "Tired and gone to Jupiter for a rest. . . Fooled by fools—think of it. . . Be back in a couple thousand years." After writing these cryptic words as a farewell, Dr. Charles H. Condell, 50 year-old professor at LeMoyné Junior College committed suicide. His body was found by Dean Boris Alexander, slumped down in bed at his home, with two self-inflicted bullet wounds in the heart. 7-7-32

Born in the West Indies, educated at Cambridge, Oxford and the University of Chicago, Dr. Condell was regarded as one of the leading Negro educators in the South.

#### Conducted Summer Session

The summer session of LeMoyné College has been conducted under direction of Dr. Condell, who has held the chair of professor of language and ethics for eight years. The additional work in connection with the summer school work coupled with his brooding over the recent death of his wife is said to have contributed much to the act of the educator causing him to suicide.

Mrs. Nixon, a teacher in the local public school system, is a sister-in-law of the deceased.

### Woman, 63, a Suicide

WASHINGTON, D.C.— (CNS.)—Mrs. Clara Broadus, 63, of the 400 block of T Street northwest, was found lying on a cot in the basement of her home in an unconscious condition. 7-9-32

Her son-in-law, James R. Weaver who discovered her condition, immediately called for help from the Emergency Hospital, but she was dead before she reached the hospital.

A glass of what appeared to be creolin poison was found beside her and a note addressed to her daughter Tess, asking for forgiveness for what she was about to do was found on the floor near her.

Relatives could give no reason for her desire to end her life.

### Brewer Drowns in Own Pilsener; Promises to Haunt Customers

Special Correspondence, THE NEW YORK TIMES  
PRAGUE, June 21—The proprietor of a small brewery in Pilsen committed suicide today by drowning himself in a vat of his own beer. He was despondent because his business had fallen off.

On the vat he wrote in chalk that he felt he must die for very shame because the consumption of his beer had decreased by 500 liters in a year and that was more than an honorable brewer could stand. He left a circular letter addressed to all former customers and those who had curtailed their orders in which he threatened to return and haunt them for their disloyalty.

### U.S. WAR VETERAN SUICIDE IN PARIS

PARIS, France.—Considerable regret is felt by the American Colony at the suicide of Thompson S. Haney, 43, a native of Little Rock, Arkansas. 7-16-32

Haney was doorman at the American Hospital at Neuilly, and was generally very much liked. He had a distinguished war record and had received several medals for bravery. For many years he had suffered from ailments caused by his war service. This, together with money difficulties, made him decide to end his life.

Before taking a heavy dose of poison, he wrote a long four-page letter to his friend, Judge Julian Thomas, stating the cause for his decision. Soon after he had swallowed the fatal dose, he called his French wife and told her all. Doctors rushed to his bedside in answer to her frenzied calls, but too late.

Funeral services were held at the American Cathedral Church by Canon Harold Belshaw, chaplain of the American Post, Paris Legion. Legion Color Guards and officials of the Legion were in attendance. The interment was in the Neuilly cemetery.

A singular fact is that a few hours after Haney's death, a letter arrived with the check for his pension from the U.S. Government. In addition to his widow, Haney leaves two children.

## TWENTY THOUSAND SUICIDES

WE have just read an account of the suicides committed in this country during the past one-year period. The figures are placed at 20,000, and while many of the victims may have resorted to self destruction for various monetary reasons, the general cause assigned for so many suicides is the depression.

Strangely enough, 99.9 per cent of these suicides were white people, and this is the reason for the news value of the report. 7-16-32

Twenty thousand people during the past year decided that they preferred death to life under certain circumstances. These people reckoned the value of life in terms of human happiness here in the United States. They must have given the question of self destruction some serious thought before taking leave of this life. They must have weighed in the balances the value of life and joy of living on the one side and an inconsequential death on the other.

The question which naturally arises is what could they believe? What was their religion? What, if any, convictions would they have about Christianity? What did they think of the hereafter, if anything? What was their conception of the soul, if they had any? What was their training?

People who prefer death to an unsatisfactory existence evidently place a great premium upon the material things of life. It is evident that they prefer to live if they can have and possess and enjoy a certain amount of things material. Just what fixes in their minds the value of material things they must own in order to make life tolerable is a question for debate. Some people are satisfied with one amount and still others would be highly dissatisfied with that same amount of material things. But when 20,000 people prefer self-destruction to living in this world and assuming their share of misfortune, losses, and embarrassment, it is some evidence that people are requiring these days a great deal more of the material things of life to justify their living than they did in years gone by. It is some evidence, at least, that people are worshiping wealth, material happiness, money, clothes, automobiles, social position and whatnot. These things have become the God of many people and, when they are lost beyond recovery, to these people their God is lost.

We wonder, after all, how many people really believe what they profess. We wonder how many people are really and truly believers in a God of any kind. We wonder if many of the professions made in His name are not so many monthlings intended to conform to a prevalent convention.

### Suicide as a "Cowardly Evasion"

"FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES"—how many times has that been put down after the name of a suicide.

More significant is the apparently increasing tendency to condone the final acts of those who refuse to face poverty, and decline the chance to try again. "Victims of the depression," they are called. Literary Digest

Actually they are victims of prosperity. Money had eased their bodies, but starved their souls. Mammon is a hard master. N.Y. City N.Y.

Looking at it thus, The American Church Monthly welcomes the letter of Bishop Olmstead in which he condemns the condonation of the suicide of a poor and wealthy manufacturer. "It is high time for the pulpit and religious press to emphasize strongly the wickedness of suicide," says this Episcopal periodical, and it goes on:

"Sympathy for the family and friends, and the natural feeling expressed in the maxim *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, make it hard in individual cases to appear to pass judgment, and the Church (Episcopal) in General Convention, by the alteration in the rubric of the Burial Office, has taken away a needed support from the parish priest.

"The warranted revolt from the barbarous practise of former centuries, whereby those who took their own lives were buried at a crossroads at midnight, and a stake driven through their bodies, has resulted in a weak sentimentality, and we have ceased to express and, perhaps, to feel the horror we ought.

"An element in the present sad situation is the tremendous mental strain under which business men are now laboring, and the dazed bewilderment with which many are beholding the wreck of their fortunes.

"But this fact suggests where the true evil and the possible remedy are to be found. It is to be noted that the suicides are chiefly among those who have been ardent in their pursuit of wealth, that its attainment has not bought satisfaction, and that its loss has meant despair.

"It is a wrong aim in life, the overvaluation of physical comfort, the mistaken emphasis on the temporal and material, which make the downfall so great and so disastrous. When the world fails those who have thought only of it, there is nothing to live for. Without hope, they are of all men most miserable. The answer to their distress can be found only in the cross of Christ, and in the knowledge of Him who was with us, yet for our sake became poor.

"A contributing cause to the epidemic of suicide is the tremendous publicity given to such cases as that of Eastman and Kreuger. Experience shows that whenever any act becomes a matter of notoriety, it finds numerous imitators. The press could do a great service by presenting such things in their true character—as cowardly evasions."

### Can He Take It?

SUICIDE AMONG NEGROES is increasing. This once allegedly happy-go-lucky race has become innoculated with this age-old disease of civilization and confirms the fact that the Negro—for wealth or woe—is taking his place in civilization. Like other so-called civilized races, the Negro is beginning to grow despondent more easily; he suffers from more illnesses, has more domestic infelicity, more insanity, more intemperance and more business reverses, and these, in the order of their importance, are the main causes of suicide. New York City N.Y.

WHILE SUICIDE is generally regarded as a crime, which in 1931 took a toll of 20,000 lives in the United States, and takes a toll of 8 per day in New York State alone, nothing is being done about it. Up to 1870, in England and Wales, which have a much smaller suicide rate than the United States, all of the suicide's property was forfeited to the Crown and his body interred at a crossroad with a stake driven through it. Even now the Church of England will not allow the burial of a suicide in consecrated ground, but the confiscation of his property has been discontinued.

THE RESTRICTIVE measures that have been tried out in England to curb self-destruction have not been tried out in the United States; nor do we especially want to see them tried out. There is still some hesitancy to bury the suicide in consecrated ground, but he is otherwise sometimes looked upon as a hero, a demented person, one to be pitied, and only occasionally as a felon. Attempted suicide before the law, when not of a psychopathic nature, enjoys the same



status as disorderly conduct.

BUT ALL OF THIS does not answer the question of what is to be done about suicide; or what can be done about it—especially as it affects the Negro. The person bent on self-destruction nearly always becomes uncommunicative. The real or unreal things gnawing at his heart he keeps to himself and he unburdens himself only after his deed is accomplished. He who would not commit suicide, then, must unburden himself and face reality.

THE COMPLEXITY of modern modes of living—far removed from nature—and the unjust burdens imposed upon him because of his color, weigh all the more heavily upon the Negro because he is civilized. Maybe, the Negro has expected too much of civilization; and now that he is entirely disillusioned concerning it he would like to escape from it and at the same time escape from life itself. Having endured all kinds of hardships and deprivations to raise himself up, he now finds that life itself—whether civilized or not—is a continual struggle in which happiness and sorrow, success and failure, wealth and poverty, freedom and slavery are evenly divided and that he who wins fights hardest.

Dread of Slavery. Mr. Money, a member of the British house of commons, in a speech delivered in the house in July last, on the subject of preventing the extension of slavery at the Cape of Good Hope, gave the following as a fact of which he was personally acquainted, having resided himself at the Cape.

"In the year, 1819, a female slave, belonging to a Dutch gentleman at the Cape, had been treated with harshness, and, at last, her mistress threatened that she would take her children from her and sell them to the Boors in the interior. The dread of that worst of all evils, which, in her estimation, could be inflicted on her offspring, so worked upon her mind, that, to save them from this fate, she took them, four in number, down to the sea, early in the morning, where she succeeded in drowning three of them, and was in the act of destroying herself and the remaining child, when she was discovered; and, the alarm being given, she was rescued from her watery grave in a state of insensibility. She was carried to the gaol, where medicines were applied to restore her, and a court of criminal justice was immediately summoned to try her. Scarcely able to stand, she was brought before this tribunal. When asked what she had to say for herself, she stared wildly, and made no answer; and in this state of apparent unconsciousness as to every thing around her, she was convicted and sentenced to death by being strangled at a stake. The following morning this sentence was carried into execution, a party of military attending, under the command of a British officer.

## Imagined Ills Cause Most Suicides, Says Veteran of Coroner's Juries

Love Angle Enters Less Often Now, Declares  
J. F. Cutbirth, Who for Years Has  
Helped Solve Tragedies Here.

By TOM ROOT.

Usually it is not the loss of money that breaks a man and drives him to suicide. It is something else.

Take the word of J. F. Cutbirth, who has served on many coroner's juries. It has been the custom of coroners here for many years to select a group of men available for service on such juries, both in the belief that by so doing, business men and others actively engaged in their pursuits may not be interrupted by service and that the small fee of \$1 will be useful to the "professional juror."

"No," says Cutbirth, "it is not just the loss of their money that causes a man to commit suicide. As often as not, it is imagination that gets them. I will explain.

"I can think of several men who committed suicide after financial losses. Their losses did not leave them destitute by any means. A lot of folk get along without complaint on what was left to them.

"What seems to plunge them into despair is the thought they are losing caste. They have got into the habit of thinking that only the life they had been living is worth while.

### Tragedies Imagined.

"It is not at all rare for persons to commit suicide, too, over tragedies that are purely imaginary. Testimony before the coroner's jury brings out the fact that brooding has made a mountain out of a mole hill. I suppose nerves are responsible for this. These men and women probably were on the verge of nervous collapse. They had lost their perspective."

"I can think of one business man, who long has held my admiration," Cutbirth resumed. "He has suffered reverses, not once, but several times, which were so severe they might well have plunged him into despair. Many business men have blown their brains out for less than even one of these. Yet he always has kept his optimism. He always has kept his balance. He just goes back to the beginning and works back up again. While he is recovering, he lives meagerly with his family. He is, of course, the healthy minded sort who never could be thought of as committing suicide."

### Love Motive Fading.

Romance, Cutbirth was asked, does it figure much in suicide? "Not much these days," Cutbirth said. "I can think of only a few cases in the last few years. Modern ideas have made some big changes. Some women still commit suicide because of broken hearts, but very few. And hardly any men do so. Of course there are exceptions.

"But modern sophistication makes

romantic suicides comparatively few. I suppose that men and women know that if they lose their sweethearts they can find new ones. There are a lot of men and women in the world. Both men and women have larger circles of acquaintance than they formerly had—I mean generally speaking. Public opinion also is a factor. Men and women, fearing ridicule, do not go about mooning over their unhappy romances. They are afraid of ridicule. They have, to a degree, the same sense of humor about their own affairs that others, who they know would ridicule their mooning, have.

### More Women Give Up.

"No, romance does not produce many suicides in Kansas City. Probably more women than men. But few of either."

Cutbirth long has served in official or semi-official capacity. He was for years a policeman. Later he was a deputy sheriff. Now he is a sort of boss among the twenty-eight professional jurors of the coroner's office.

This office keeps a list of that many white men and sixteen to eighteen negroes from which juries of six are chosen. The juries not only hear inquests but are sent out at a moment's notice for the formality of viewing bodies.

Several attorneys, interviewed as to this practice, held that it was entirely legal and that it had its practical aspects. For one thing, the jurors through long practice have become thoroughly familiar with procedure. For another, they are always available at a moment's notice and welcome the opportunity to earn the meager pay, \$1 a day—and that's all they get even if they hear more than one case during the day.